Mystical Motifs in a Greek Synagogal Prayer?

Introduction

The work called *Apostolic Constitutions* (henceforth: *AC*) is a late-fourth-century church order, most probably compiled in Syrian Antioch in the 380s. Its eight books deal with a wide variety of subjects: Christian behaviour, ecclesiastical hierarchy, widows, orphans, martyrs, schisms, the eucharist, prayers, ordinations, discipline, etc. It has long been recognized that many of the prayer texts in books 7 and 8 have Jewish precedents and that several of these prayers even have a Jewish Vorlage. There is a consensus nowadays that the six prayers in *AC* 7.33–38 are christianized versions of the first six of the Seven Berakhot for Shabbat. There is no consensus, however, regarding the degree of christianization of these prayers: Some advocate a maximalist position and see the hand of the Christian compiler only in the patently Christian passages (Kohler, Bousset, Goodenough); others advocate a minimalist position and believe that only a few scraps of the Jewish original *Grundschrift* have been left unaltered (Fiensy); and again others steer a middle course (Van der Horst). But apart from that point of disagreement, all scholars agree about the existence of a Jewish Vorlage for these six prayers and they have good reasons to do so. Every single prayer text in *AC* 7 has at least one verbal parallel to one of the Hebrew Seven Benedicitions for Shabbat. To give just one clear instance: the second prayer, in *AC* 7.34, ends with a clause in which God is called “the reviver of the dead” (*ho zôopoios tôn nekrôn*) just as the corresponding Hebrew berakhah (also the


second, *Gevuroth*) ends with God as *mechayyeh ha-metim*. As Fiensy rightly puts it, “These verbal similarities and equivalents would be striking enough if they appeared in isolated prayers. But, coming as they do in a prayer collection, and appearing for the most part in their proper order, they constitute a convincing corpus of evidence to suggest that *AC 7.33–38* is a Greek version of the Hebrew Seven Benedictions.” It is unknown when the Greek translation and reworking of these berakhot was undertaken, but that must have taken place between 150 and 350 ce, most probably in the third century ce.

The third prayer in this collection (*AC 7.35*) stresses God’s holiness and his being praised by holy ones in the Trisagion, Israel’s liturgical union with these holy ones, God’s kingship, and it also has the characteristic combination of quotes from Isa. 6:3 and Ezek. 3:12. These elements qualify it as the Greek parallel to the third berakhah of the Seven Benedictions, *Qedushah*. As we shall see, the Greek form displays several elements that occur also in liturgical texts from Qumran and in Hekhalot treatises.

In this contribution, I will first present the entire text of the prayer in *AC 7.35* in my own translation. In this translation, the patently Christian elements are italicized, the phrases that arguably belong to the Jewish source are in bold type, and what remains in regular type is the category of dubia. In the then following explanatory notes I will refrain from discussing at length the problems of how to disentangle the Jewish *Grundschrift* from its Christian redaction and I will focus mainly on §§3–4 because these paragraphs form the most important section for our purposes. It will be shown that here we have an originally Jewish text in which, even after its Christian reworking, several ideas and elements in the phraseology stand in a tradition that dates back to the Second Temple period and later resurfaces in Jewish mystical treatises from late antiquity.

**Translation of *AC 7.35***

(1) Great are you, O Lord almighty, and great is your power, and of your understanding there is no measure. O Creator (and) Saviour, you who

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3 *Prayers* 134.
4 For details about the dating see van der Horst & Newman, *Early Jewish Prayers in Greek* 21–27.
5 For the arguments underlying these distinctions the reader is referred to my elaborate commentary in *Early Jewish Prayers in Greek*.
6 Cf. Ps 146[147]:5.